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FOR THE VICE PRESIDENT FROM CDA CHRISTOPHER HENZEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/18/2024

TAGS: PREL OVIP BA

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR BAHRAINI CROWN PRINCE,S MEETING  
WITH THE VICE PRESIDENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d)

¶1. (S) Mr. Vice President, your meeting June 26 in Washington with the Bahraini Crown Prince, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, will be an opportunity to engage with an up-and-coming reformist Arab leader. By receiving him you will also reinforce a bilateral relationship from which the U.S. derives solid benefits like military access, counterterrorism cooperation, and diplomatic support. Shaikh Salman speaks fondly of having met you during a stop you made in Bahrain several years ago.

¶2. (S) The 39 year-old Crown Prince is a product of the U.S. Navy's high school in Bahrain and of American University in Washington. He was the force behind the economic reforms that helped liberalize Bahrain's economy and led to the 2006 Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. His father, King Hamad, is healthy and firmly in control, but is clearly preparing Shaikh Salman to eventually lead the country, and is steadily increasing his role in government. Within Bahrain's Sunni ruling family, the Crown Prince's faction argues for a more conciliatory approach to Bahrain's restive Shia majority. He will likely seek to exchange views with you on strategies for countering both Sunni and Shia militancy in the region; the Crown Prince sees education reform, regional public diplomacy, and Arab-Israeli peacemaking as the keys.

¶3. (S) In part because of the potential threat Iran has long posed, the Crown Prince is committed to the close U.S.-Bahrain security relationship. Bahrain hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet's headquarters, facilitates heavy U.S. military traffic through its ports and airfields, has offered to provide a company of security forces to protect a Coalition facility in Afghanistan, and last year took a turn commanding the coalition naval task force that patrols the central Gulf. With a nervous eye on Iran's missiles, the Bahrainis are deeply grateful for the U.S. Patriot anti-missile battery deployed here last year, and for U.S. plans to place a second battery here soon.

¶4. (S) The Crown Prince views Iran with deep suspicion. He recently commented to us that the clerical regime had demonstrated its disregard for world opinion by falsifying the results of the election. He shares our view of Iran's harmful role in the region, and supports international efforts to bring Iran's nuclear program under control. At the same time, the Bahrainis maintain a limited bilateral relationship with Iran, and have for years been engaged in slow-motion negotiations for the potential purchase of Iranian natural gas. The Bahrainis probably hope that the talks with Iran will make their preferred suppliers, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, more forthcoming.

¶5. (S) Bahrain was firmly in the moderate camp during the past year's intra-Arab debates over the Gaza fighting and Qatar's embrace of regional radicals. The Bahrainis stay close to their patron Saudi Arabia on most issues, though on Iraq they have gone farther, opening an Embassy in Baghdad and formally inviting PM Maliki and President Talibani to visit. Bahrain has agreed to make a small donation for Pakistani IDP relief. The Bahraini leadership is enthusiastic about the Obama administration, especially its efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but pessimistic about the Netanyahu government, and ended the limited public contacts it had with Israel once Tzipi Livni went into opposition. Special envoys Mitchell and Holbrooke, and special advisor Ross have all visited Bahrain recently; the Bahrainis were grateful for the briefings they provided. The Crown Prince will likely be accompanied to your meeting by Bahrain's able foreign minister, Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa.

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